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SUBJECT: RUSSIA COMFORTABLE WITH STATUS QUO IN BELARUS
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Classified By: A/POL Bruce Donahue. Reasons: 1.4(B/D).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The MFA's official stance on Belarus seems to have shifted from resigned noninterference to passive support for Lukashenko and the status quo. However, Russian activists and leaders of the Belarusian opposition based in Moscow have not given up hope that determined resistance will eventually produce results. Participants in the January 30 meeting of the Russian-Belarusian Human Rights Commission conceded that Lukashenko will win the March 19 election, but believe it is time to begin developing a cogent post-election strategy. On February 6 Belarusian opposition candidates Milinkevich and Kozulin visited Moscow for talks with Russian opinion-makers. While Russia walks a careful political line between support for the Belarusian status quo and frustration with Lukashenko, its economic goals seem clear: the Kremlin wants increased control over Beltransgaz and eventually monetary union. End Summary.

No News on Putin-Lukashenko Meeting

[1](#)2. (C) Asked January 30 for a read-out of the January 24 Putin-Lukashenko one-on-one that took place on the eve of the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) special plenary, MFA Belarus Desk Senior Counselor Igor Gurko was unable to provide any details, noting that only the two presidents knew what had been discussed. Instead, Gurko played up the packet of six bilateral agreements signed by the two presidents that address Union State matters such as registration, taxation, and health care. Without a hint of irony, Gurko characterized the Union State as "90 percent complete on the expert level." Coverage of the Putin-Lukashenko meeting by the major Russian dailies was almost non-existent. A front page Nezavisimaya Gazeta article on January 25, humorously entitled "It's Taking Some Time to Separate the Flies from the Meat," merely rehashed Union State issues without broaching the subject of the presidential meeting. Like their December 15 meeting in Sochi, no one knows (or wants to say) what Putin and Lukashenko discussed in St. Petersburg. (Note: Belarus Embassy Political Counselor Leonid Sennikov declined to meet with us. End Note.)

GOR on Belarusian Election

[1](#)3. (C) Turning to the March 19 election, Gurko underlined points we first heard from DFM Karasin January 18 (ref A): Belarus is a small country that threatens no one and will modernize (even democratize) at its own pace. There is no chance for an Orange Revolution there, Gurko continued, given the outlook and character of the Belarusian people, and therefore taking a hard line on the Belarusian election will only box the West into a corner. When Lukashenko wins the

election, the U.S. and EU will have no alternative but to resort to a tougher stance toward the Lukashenko government. Gurko noted the current Belarusian standard of living is not bad and concluded that sanctions, should they be enacted against Minsk, would only hurt ordinary Belarusians.

¶4. (U) Putin himself may have best outlined the GOR position on Belarus in his January 31 press conference. Putin said "a free election is always possible" and characterized his contact with Lukashenko as support for the Belarusian people, not as support for "one political figure or another whatever the cost." Putin said the GOR is pursuing "balanced" relations with Belarus -- including complex negotiations over details of the Union State -- and cast the bilateral relationship as historically "special," a fact, he added, that the West should not forget. DPM and Minister of Defense Sergey Ivanov went further at the February 5 Munich Conference on Security Policy, asking rhetorically, "Does anybody in this hall doubt Lukashenko is the most popular candidate for president in Belarus?" Ivanov said Lukashenko "will win" and called on the international community to "do all we can" to prevent any election-related unrest from turning ugly.

The Russian-Belarusian Human Rights Commission

¶5. (C) On January 30 the little known Russian-Belarusian Human Rights Commission met in Moscow to discuss the situation in Belarus. Co-chaired by Sergey Karaganov (member of the President's Council for the Development of Human Rights) and Valeriy Pavlov, the organization's designated liaison between the Belarusian democratic movement and Russia, the Commission's stated purpose is to safeguard human

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rights and free speech in Russia and Belarus, according to its June 23 RIA Novosti press release. ORT Special Projects Director Pavel Sheremet has given several interviews about the Commission and acts as an informal spokesman. However, apart from a late December press announcement criticizing the GOB for its clamp-down on free expression, the Commission has worked largely behind the scenes. Notably, while the Commission has ties to the Russian government and remains officially non-partisan, it also includes activists with strong anti-Lukashenko tendencies.

¶6. (C) In separate meetings, Pavlov and Sheremet -- both opponents of Lukashenko -- agreed the Belarusian president has a lock on the election, and the GOR will likely recognize a Lukashenko victory, despite any U.S. and EU claims that the elections were not free and fair. They also concurred that the GOR perceives Milinkevich as Western-leaning and that the Russian elite is not backing him politically or financially. Notably, Sheremet indicated that Lukashenko has been spending "huge" sums of money to wine and dine Russian journalists, especially those from the regions, and that the Belarusian Embassy in Moscow has at least seven employees devoted to public affairs outreach. (Bio Notes: Born in Belarus, Pavel Sheremet served as ORT's Minsk Bureau Chief before being sentenced to two years for illegally crossing the Belarusian border in 1997. He ultimately served three months and later moved to Moscow. Valeriy Pavlov was a Major General in the Belarusian KGB and served a stint as Interior Minister before later winning a seat in the Belarusian Upper House. Pavlov is now Deputy Director of the Dionis Club, a Russian import-export firm trading in wine and tobacco. End Note.)

¶7. (C) Pavlov and Sheremet did not agree on the opposition's next steps. While concerned that the Belarusian authorities may remove Milinkevich from the ballot (on the pretext of registration irregularities), Sheremet maintained that, even after a Lukashenko victory, Milinkevich remains the best figure to lead a unified opposition front and perhaps help the opposition make significant gains in Belarus' local elections this fall. For his part, Pavlov believes that

Milinkevich will no longer be the best candidate to lead the Belarusian opposition after losing the March election and that the U.S. and EU are wasting money in supporting him. Instead, Pavlov is betting that Aleksandr Kozulin, described as having ties to the security services, will make the best compromise candidate in the next (possibly early) Belarusian presidential election. The Commission is already planning to hold a meeting in Minsk on March 20, the day after the presidential election.

Belarusian Cultural Society

¶8. (C) On February 6 the Belarusian Cultural Society of Moscow hosted a roundtable that brought Belarusian opposition figures -- Aleksandr Milinkevich, Aleksandr Kozulin, Sergey Kalyakin, and Anatoliy Lebedev among others -- to Moscow for discussions with Russian opinion-makers. Among Russian participants were Boris Nemtsov, Union of Right Forces (SPS) leader Nikita Belykh, CIS Institute Deputy Director Vladimir Zharikhin, RFE/RL's Vitaliy Portnikov, and several media correspondents.

¶9. (C) The Belarusian opposition's objective was to assuage Russian concerns. Milinkevich called Russia a "strategic partner" and said Russians should view Belarus as a bridge to the West, not a country that could end up behind a "Western wall." Milinkevich underlined that the United Opposition harbored no latent anti-Russian agenda, not least because an anti-Russian platform would never win in Belarus, but added that two-thirds of Belarusians want to keep their sovereignty. For his part Kozulin took umbrage at the mention of a united opposition candidate. While plugging integration with Russia, Kozulin said anti-Russian sentiment in Belarus is increasing and attributed this to Lukashenko's manipulation of the state media.

¶10. (C) Most of the Russian participants expressed support for a unified opposition, but Belykh went furthest, saying the Union of Right Forces was ready to support the Unified Opposition and work for a Milinkevich victory in March. Zharikhin said Lukashenko has considerable support in Russia and that the opposition's message got little attention. Nemtsov welcomed the unified opposition, lamented the growth of anti-Russianism on Belarusian state TV, and said it would not be possible to create a Union State with a dictator (who would never give up sovereignty). Nemtsov also questioned whether the participation of the Belarusian opposition wouldn't give the March 19 election legitimacy. Nearly all present -- from both sides of the table -- agreed that the election results would be falsified and that Lukashenko has

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already designated a 70-75 percent election victory for himself.

What the Kremlin Wants

¶11. (C) While official Moscow is ready to accept Lukashenko's continued tenure in office, the Kremlin's economic designs in Belarus are clear. According to Sheremet, Kremlin is waiting until after Lukashenko's victory at the polls to begin a serious bid for control of Beltransgaz; everything is on "stand-by" until after March 19. Explaining his view, Sheremet pointed to several GOR statements indicating that all CIS countries, including Belarus, would eventually have to pay market rates for Russian gas. He said Belarus' current price for Russian gas (\$46/tcm) would be revisited, possibly as early as April. Continued low rates will depend on what further concessions Gazprom can squeeze out of Beltransgaz. He added that Gazprom's negotiations with Beltransgaz would be timed, conveniently, to take place when Russian-Ukrainian relations are in the foreground of CIS news coverage. Without going into details, Sheremet said that achieving a monetary union

with Belarus was also an important, though secondary, goal for the Kremlin.

Comment

¶12. (C) Our conversations with the MFA's Belarus desk officer reinforce our view (ref B) that the Foreign Ministry does not have the lead on policy toward Belarus. The MFA's talking points on the Belarusian election, not to mention press comments by Putin and DPM Ivanov, hint of a stiffening in the GOR position. Where before, we sensed a resigned acceptance of Lukashenko's reelection, now there seems to be some indication that -- faced with a united U.S.-EU position -- the GOR is beginning to defend Lukashenko and the status quo.

¶13. (C) Russia's approach to Belarus must be seen in the broader context of Russian policy in the region. Lukashenko may at times be frustrating, but from the Russian perspective he is better than a Western-leaning alternative. The GOR does not want the problems it faces with Ukraine and Georgia following their colored revolutions to spread to Belarus or to see in Minsk a government that might eventually seek NATO membership. The recent warming of Russian-Uzbek relations is instructive; those spurned by the West can still find a friendly face in Moscow.

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